

Simpson Is Back in Court: A Reporter's View

by Judy Muller September 19, 2007

O.J. Simpson — arrested again! As headlines go, this one is both provocative and predictable.

Provocative because of the O. Henry-like nature of a story come full circle: a narcissistic former athlete acquitted of a double homicide allegedly brought down by a petty craving for his own sports memorabilia. Predictable because O.J. Simpson is one of those newsmakers who return to the media spotlight with the regularity of swallows to Capistrano.

And for all those O.J. watchers of old (myself included) it's hard to resist a little adrenalin rush when yet another shoe drops — Bruno Magli, of course.

Even so, I find myself fighting the addictive pull of the predictable.

It feels tawdry, this tabloid high. I am reminded of Thoreau's scorn for the news junkies of his time — the townspeople near his beloved Walden Pond who just had to know the latest.

"If we read of one man robbed or murdered," he wrote, "...or one house burned, we never need read of another. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances? To a philosopher," he concluded, "all news is gossip."

Since I make a living at this stuff, I would never go that far. But Thoreau had a point. Some news items are downright reeking of déjà vu: Wars that turn into quagmires à la Vietnam, moralizing Republicans hoisted on their own petards, reform-minded Democrats caught up in fund-raising scandals. And, of course, O.J. Simpson, in a category all his own.

Certainly we are acquainted with the principles behind all these stories: abuse of power, hypocrisy, greed, a craving for justice.

But in feasting so often on these recycled themes, do news consumers pass up more substantive fare?

How about some health care reform! Too dry? How about a big warm serving of climate change? A bit too depressing, perhaps, to qualify as a so-called water-cooler topic even though, of course, water — too much or too little — is precisely the point.

But that's years away. Plenty of time. Meanwhile, you can hear the audio tape of O.J.'s screaming match over his memorabilia on the Internet — right now.

Light Sentences For Raptor Killers Riles Bird Lovers

By Rob Manning September 18, 2007

Environmentalists and animal rights' advocates expressed outrage last spring, when undercover federal agents infiltrated a group of pigeon hobbyists. They discovered that pigeon owners were killing federally protected hawks and falcons that were threatening their pigeons.

Federal prosecutors appear to have struck a deal with one of the men charged in Oregon with killing possibly dozens of federally protected birds of prey. But wildlife advocates are unhappy with the proposed sentence, as Rob Manning reports.

Last June, three Oregon men were charged with either killing, or attempting to kill, peregrine falcons and Cooper's hawks. Fish and Wildlife officials alleged that the men were part of an interstate network of people interested in the hobby of flying roller pigeons.

That's a kind of domestic pigeon with a genetic tendency to fly in odd ways. The pigeons' behavior attracts predatory birds. So, the pigeon owners retaliated by shooting, or trapping the raptors, according to investigators.

Now, the first of the three men has pled guilty. David Patte with U.S. Fish and Wildlife says it's good news.

David Patte: "Mitch Reed admitted to killing 13 hawks while speaking with an undercover agent for the Fish and Wildlife Service, but our agent did not see him in the act of killing a hawk or falcon. So, we're pleased with the sentencing, and are pleased with the guilty plea that Mitch Reed entered into the court."

If approved by a federal judge, Reed will have to pay a \$10,000 fine, will lose his hunting and fishing license, and will be on probation. But, he won't be going to jail.

Bob Sallinger: "When it's this pervasive, I think it calls for jail time."

Bob Sallinger is the conservation director of the Audubon Society of Portland. He has a 15-year history of caring for falcons and hawks -- even climbing up bridge scaffolding to look after their nests. But Sallinger says he's not out on a limb this time.

Bob Sallinger: "I can't think of too many situations where the public has expressed this kind of outrage. We've just been deluged with phone calls and e-mails and people wanting to see the maximum penalty imposed. I think the public will be surprised that they're not going to get jail time."

U.S. Fish and Wildlife spokesman, David Patte, says the deal offered to Reed may not be extended to other defendants. Investigators reported finding a dead raptor at the house of Ivan Hanchett. Patte says that's one reason Hanchett could face a tougher penalty.

David Patte: "We would expect that perhaps some of the other defendants, who took a larger role in the leadership of the local organization. And, Ivan Hanchett had admitted to our undercover agent to killing more hawks than some of the other defendants, and maybe that might sway the US Attorney's office to look at the sentencing a little differently."

The U.S. Attorney on the case didn't return calls for comment. But the attorney representing Hanchett says he expects his client will get the same deal offered to Reed.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act does allow for up to a year in prison, or fines up to 10 times what Mitch Reed is facing, if prosecutors can prove "baiting" was involved.

But Bob Sallinger with Portland Audubon, says the problem is that the legal system doesn't see such misdemeanors as that serious of a crime.

Bob Sallinger: "We think the law right now is the limiting factor, and that until Congress weighs in, and says for particularly heinous wildlife violations under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, we're going to make it a felony, it's going to be very hard to get the kind of jail time that really is appropriate in these cases, and that I think the public demands."

Sallinger says his organization is making expanding the law a priority in the next year. He says the need for a stronger law goes beyond pigeon fanciers.

Sallinger is in the process of paying rewards to two people who saw bird killings take place, and turned in the offenders. Sallinger says one was in eastern Oregon and nothing to do with pigeons.

Bob Sallinger: "A gentleman shot a great horned owl, while someone asked him not to do that -- begged him not to do that. He made the statement that he did that on a regular basis, which is just incredibly sad."

In that case, the federal penalty was only a \$750 ticket. Portland Audubon paid twice that much as a reward. But he says in the future, they'll be more likely to pay smaller amounts in some cases.

As for the big cases involving the roller pigeons, more of the suspects are expected in court next month.